

Mediating Queer Visibility: Identity Modulation and Sex Work in Reddit Communities

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Abstract: In an era of increasing content restrictions across digital platforms, specialised Reddit forums have emerged as spaces for queer individuals to express their sexuality, build connections, and market sexual content. While many mainstream social media networks restrict sexual or nude content, Reddit's moderation structure allows for designated spaces where sexual content can exist. This paper explores the subcultures of three prominent queer and trans-centred NSFW ('not safe for work') Reddit communities (subreddits): r/transporn, r/FtMPorn, and r/EnbyLewds. We examined how these digital spaces function simultaneously as sites of identity validation, affirmation, and commerce. Our findings show distinct cultural practices across these subreddits, each with unique approaches to language use, body descriptions, and content moderation. We examine how these spaces can facilitate gender-affirming interactions, allowing users to express identities beyond heteronormative constraints, while also serving as marketing channels for digital sex work. Drawing on Duguay's concept of 'identity modulation' and Tiidenberg's work on digital self-representation, we analyse how queer content creators strategically adjust their presentation across platforms with different norms and audiences. Our research discusses the intertwining of commercial interests with identity expression and interrogates how moderation practices shape these environments by crafting safer, more inclusive spaces for queer individuals. By fostering supportive and flexible environments, the subreddits create a platform for both affirmation and sexual agency, reflecting the evolving nature of erotic culture within marginalised online communities.

Keywords: trans sexwork, Reddit, identity modulation, queer studies

Anna Ivanova, Dana Hombach. 2025. Mediating Queer Visibility: Identity Modulation and Sex Work in Reddit Communities. *Gender a výzkum / Gender and Research* 26 (2): 88–116, <https://doi.org/10.13060/gav.2025.018>.

Online spaces offer both opportunities and risks for marginalised communities seeking connection and self-expression. While digital platforms can facilitate identity exploration and community building, they also present significant challenges, including content restrictions, harassment, and surveillance. For many queer individuals, sexual self-discovery and expression involve sharing and consuming sexual or sexualised ‘Not Safe For Work (NSFW)’ content, yet, most platforms ban or heavily restrict such material through practices of shadowbanning and deplatforming. In contrast, Reddit has emerged as a valuable alternative platform due to its relatively permissive policies toward NSFW content and its community-driven moderation system, which allows niche adult communities to thrive within defined spaces. This makes Reddit an important site for studying queer digital cultures and practices (Miller 2022; Paasonen, Jarrett, Light 2019).

This paper explores how queer and trans individuals portray themselves in NSFW subreddits and how they interact with one another within these spaces. It examines the dynamics of sex work and the conditions these subreddits foster online. We aim to explore how and why queer users engage with these platforms. In particular, we are interested in how queer individuals use Reddit to provide and share their own content to ‘be seen’ and find self-validation, to connect with like-minded and similarly-bodied individuals, and to find clients through community-based sex work. While these types of community-centred sexual interactions are often precarious on other social media platforms (e.g. Wang, Ding 2022; Labor 2025), we are interested in the role of dedicated subreddits that create distinct online cultures for ongoing engagement.

We examine several of the largest and most active queer and trans-focused subreddits, *r/FtMPorn*, *r/EnbyLewds*, and *r/transporn*. Subreddits are user-created forums within Reddit that are organised around a specific topic or community. They exist for any conceivable topic or interest group and are designated on Reddit by *r/SubredditName*. All three of the subreddits investigated in this study allow queer and trans individuals to share explicit images and videos, including for commercial purposes, while enforcing strict rules against misgendering and transphobia, thus attempting to foster safer environments. They are catering to amateur queer sex workers and a wider (queer) audience. Each of the subreddits has a different focus and culture that we explore by conducting a digital ethnography.

Moreover, we contextualise Reddit usage within the fluidity of the platform economy that digital sex workers find themselves in: the landscape of digital sex work has dramatically evolved in the past few years, shaped by shifting platform policies, technological innovations, and regulatory or political pressures. By 2025, queer sex workers navigate a complex ecosystem of interdependent platforms that serve overlapping functions within their overall digital strategy (Wang, Ding 2022; Labor 2025). For queer sex workers, platforms simultaneously offer unprecedented visibility and impose new forms of precarity. Within this interconnected ecosystem, digital sex work-

ers have to navigate how to strategically leverage different platforms' affordances in the most efficient way for them.

In this paper, we begin by introducing our theoretical framework for understanding digital platforms, identity work, and queer communities online. We describe Reddit as a platform and our methodological approach of digital ethnography. Following this, we examine the culture of posting within and between these subreddits, analysing the dynamics of affirmation, community building, and commercial activity. We then present insights from interviews with queer sex workers, which provide additional context about how digital sex workers navigate platform ecosystems and identity presentation across different spaces. Finally, we discuss these findings within broader theoretical frameworks of identity modulation, digital self-representation, and queer joy, considering the implications for understanding how marginalised communities create and maintain affirming spaces online.

Literature review

Digital platforms and queer community formation

Online spaces have played a significant role in trans identity formation and community building since the early days of the internet, offering connection, visibility, and affirmation often unavailable in offline contexts. The growth of home computer use in the 1990s was crucial for the development of trans communities (Whittle 1998, 2006; Cromwell 1999; Shapiro 2004). Whittle (1998) specifically highlights how cyberspace facilitated trans political activism and enabled the creation and promotion of 'transgender' as a self-identification category. Stryker (2006) observes that usage of the term 'transgender' increased exponentially around 1995, fuelled in part by internet expansion. This historical context frames our understanding of contemporary online trans spaces as continuing a tradition of community formation through digital means that spans three decades.

Raun's (2016) concept of an 'affective counter-public' is particularly relevant here, as these subreddits maintain 'an awareness of their subordinate status' while simultaneously creating space for resisting dominant discourses around trans identity. The public platform these subreddits provide becomes transformative, allowing users to renegotiate and resist subject positions that pathologise or victimise queer and trans individuals. As Raun notes in his study of YouTube trans vloggers, this public display aims at 'transforming, testing and reevaluating styles of embodiment and the feelings of shame and disgust that surround them', making the visibility of these interactions crucial to their transformative potential.

Reddit is a social media platform used for news aggregation, content rating, and forum-based interaction. Content is organised into subreddits, which are user-cre-

ated boards focusing on specific topics. Each subreddit is moderated by volunteers who belong to the respective community. Registered users ('Redditors') contribute content in the form of links, text posts, images, and videos, which are ranked by up- and downvotes. Currently, Reddit is one of the largest social media sites and ranks as the 9th most-visited website globally.¹ Unlike many other platforms, Reddit permits NSFW content. As of September 2024, such content is restricted to designated NSFW subreddits and must be explicitly flagged as adult material. Additionally, active users must be registered and verify that they are over 18 years old in order to access this content.² As described by Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light (2019), the NSFW tag takes on a double role: it functions as a warning for outsiders as well as an invitation for users interested in the respective content.

While Reddit as a platform has been studied extensively (Medvedev, Lambiotte, Delvenne 2019; Singer et al. 2014) and to some extent in relation to queer representation and NSFW content (Corradini et al. 2021; Makbul, Zannat, Hale 2024; Miller 2022; Robards 2018; Watson 2021), the specific role of NSFW representations of queer bodies in community formation remains underexplored.

Identity work and digital self-representation

Digital platforms serve as spaces where individuals can 'type oneself into being' and explore aspects of identity and sexuality without fear of social repercussions (Sundén 2003, as cited in Tiidenberg 2014). In these spaces, sharing explicit content becomes an important aspect of personal transitions and identity exploration. Tiidenberg emphasises that identity is not stable or given but rather 'a work in progress' that requires continuous reflection and social validation. The visual sharing of one's body through 'self-shooting' (taking and sharing selfies or videos) serves a critical function by giving 'new meaning to one's embodied identity' (Tiidenberg 2014).

This process is particularly significant for trans and non-binary individuals, whose embodied experiences may be marginalised or invalidated in mainstream spaces. Through posting content in digital communities, users engage in sexual self-exploration, which Tiidenberg, drawing on Arnett (2004) and Horowitz and Bromnick (2007), identifies as an important aspect of emerging adulthood. The community feedback these posts receive serves as a 'witnessed manifestation' of individualised identity development, providing necessary social acknowledgment for self-reflexive identity projects (Tiidenberg 2014). By receiving affirmative comments that align

¹ November 2024, retrieved 11/2/2025 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most-visited_websites).

² Retrieved 2/1/2025 (<https://support.reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/360061032831-How-do-I-view-NSFW-communities>).

with their gender identity and preferred body terminology, users find validation for identities that might otherwise be contested or erased in broader social contexts. Identity presentation across digital platforms involves strategic adaptation to different contexts. Tiidenberg's analysis reveals how social media users craft multifaceted identities through ongoing performances of self-presentation, noting that identity is 'multiple, not singular, fixed, or static' (Tiidenberg, van der Nagel 2020). This connects to what Duguay (2022) describes as 'identity modulation' – the strategic adjustment of self-presentation across platforms with different norms and audiences. As Duguay notes (2022: 18), queer individuals develop 'contextual practices for negotiating visibility across platforms with different governance mechanisms and user cultures'.

This process operates through what Raun (2016) describes as 'interaffectivity' – a reciprocal process where subjectivity and affect mutually constitute the self through ongoing interactions with others. Digital platforms like Reddit facilitate both identity production and social recognition, allowing users to create and label their identities while receiving feedback and support.

Platform ecosystems and digital sex work

While social media platforms can serve as valuable spaces for connection and discourse, they also present significant challenges for queer communities. Triggs, Møller, and Neumayer (2019) note that 'context collapse' on Reddit can result in heightened vulnerability for queer users seeking support in semi-anonymous spaces. Similarly, Park, Seering, and Bernstein (2022) observe antisocial behaviour on Reddit, often manifesting as targeted harassment against marginalised groups. Schmitz, Burghardt, and Murić (2022) further demonstrate that hateful online communities on Reddit actively radicalise users, increasing the prevalence of hate speech site-wide.

Shadowbanning and deplatforming represent common moderation practices used by many mainstream social media platforms to restrict or remove NSFW content without explicit notification to users. Shadowbanning involves covertly limiting the visibility of users' posts, making their content effectively invisible to others, while deplatforming refers to the complete removal of users or communities from a platform (Gillespie 2018). These measures often disproportionately affect creators of adult content, limiting their ability to reach audiences and build communities.

As Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light (2019) established in their foundational work on NSFW content, digital platforms are not neutral spaces but active mediators that shape how sexual expression is both enabled and constrained online. Their concept of 'platform vernacular' – the distinctive communication styles, norms, and practices that emerge on specific platforms – remains particularly relevant for understanding how different platforms develop distinctive cultures around sexual content.

Rather than viewing platforms as discrete categories, Swords, Laing, and Cook (2021) propose understanding them as a networked ecosystem with overlapping functions. They identify how platforms serve different roles within sex workers' overall business strategies, with some primarily facilitating client discovery, others enabling content monetisation, and many serving hybrid functions. This perspective helps explain how platforms like Reddit can function simultaneously as community spaces and as entry points in a broader marketing funnel.

Sanders et al. (2018) document how sex workers develop sophisticated cross-platform strategies, using more public-facing platforms to build visibility while directing potential clients to monetised spaces – a practice that continues to evolve as platform policies change. For queer sex workers specifically, this navigation includes additional layers of complexity around gender expression and representation, as platforms simultaneously offer unprecedented visibility and impose new forms of precarity.

The usage of social media sites for the promotion of digital sex work has been described for gay sex workers (Wang, Ding 2022) as well as in the context of a participatory online porn culture (Smith 2017). In these studies, it was found that in comparison to conventional porn actors, this form of digital sex work hinges on a strong notion of creativity, a certain disclosure of the private life, and the creation of a connection between the content creator and the user-as-potential-client (Smith 2017; Wang, Ding 2022).

Wright and Falek's (2024) concept of 'queer joy' provides a framework for understanding the affirmative interactions observed in these digital communities. Drawing on previous works on empowered joy, such as Black Joy (Mitchell 2022) and crip joy (Wright, Manuel 2024), they consider queer joy to be 'affective engagement that creates expansiveness, where constraints from dominant sexual scripts loosen in ways that feel liberating and deeply pleasurable'. In this way, 'queer and trans people negotiate the performativity of gender and sex, their own bodily knowledge, and the epistemic injustices that have precluded this knowledge from being valued'.

This theoretical framework highlights the tensions between platform affordances and constraints for queer communities. While digital spaces can enable authentic expression and community formation, they operate within broader systems of surveillance, content restriction, and potential harassment. The success of spaces like the Reddit communities examined in this study depends on careful navigation of these competing forces – leveraging platform features that support community building while developing protective measures against the very real risks that digital platforms pose to marginalised users.

Methods

Over the course of three months (from December 2024 until March 2025), we conducted a digital ethnography in the queer digital sex work sphere on Reddit. First, we collected a list of NSFW subreddits using search terms such as 'trans', 'enby', 'FtM', 'MtF', and 'queer' to account for the variability in queer representation, and 'porn' and 'NSFW' to find explicit communities.

The terms 'enby', 'FtM' (female-to-male), and 'MtF' (male-to-female) are part of a diverse lexicon used within and beyond trans and non-binary communities to describe gender identities and transitions. Enby is a phonetic abbreviation of 'NB' (non-binary), referring to individuals whose gender identity does not fit within the traditional binary of male or female (Richards et al. 2016), while FtM and MtF are commonly used shorthand terms to describe trans men and trans women, respectively (e.g. Beemyn, Rankin 2011). To increase our search radius, we also screened the suggested subreddits when viewing a community. In this first step, we compiled over 40 subreddits of varying size, activity, and community focus. Through this assessment, we found that the vast majority of active queer NSFW subreddits is focused on transfeminine porn, totalling several millions of members. Moreover, in subreddits that aim to be inclusive of all trans representations, such as r/TransExplicit, a subreddit of 130,000 members that describes itself as the 'Hottest inclusive TransPorn lounge of Transfem, TransMasc and non-binary TS Porn', mainly content of transfeminine porn was being posted during the course of our assessment. By contrast, communities focused on transmasculine or non-binary porn content were much harder to find and were much smaller.

From this list of NSFW subreddits, we decided to zoom in on three communities that focus on different groups: transgender and genderqueer people, and non-binary individuals. We filtered for subreddits that have a large member base and active engagement and show active moderation. We excluded communities that reproduce potentially offensive, trans-phobic, or harmful language in their name or description. Through these filtering steps, we settled on r/transporn to represent a focus on transfeminine porn (even though technically, it is also open to transmasculine or non-binary porn), r/FtMPorn for transmasculine porn, and r/EnbyLewds for non-binary porn.³ We chose these communities because they had a significant number of subscribers: r/EnbyLewds with 220K members, r/FtMPorn with 283K members, and r/transporn with 1M members (as of April 2025), and we specifically picked r/FtMPorn and

³ While terms like 'FtM' are considered outdated in much contemporary discourse about transgender experiences because they emphasise a binary transition narrative that many trans people find reductive, we use the term here when directly referencing online communities that incorporate this terminology in their names.

r/EnbyLewds because they are run and moderated by members of the queer community.

In those three subreddits, we conducted a comparative observation of user activity, content, and moderation practices. Rather than attempting a comprehensive assessment by scanning all user interactions and posts as proposed by Cauteruccio et al. (2022), we aimed for a more qualitative approach to investigate the cultures and behaviours within the subreddits. Over the course of three months, we identified around 40 active users for each of the three subreddits and noted their activities within their respective communities. We observed whether they were posting from a newly generated account or had been active in the community for a longer time, whether they were actively engaging in the comment section of their posts, how they presented and advertised themselves in their user profile, and whether they actively advertised for any commercial digital sex work site or tool such as OnlyFans or other platforms. For each of the profiles, we analysed three to five of the most recent posts, depending on previous user activity (for some of the newest profiles, not enough posts were available yet). In total, this equates to around 480 posts. As we were aiming for an analysis of current activities, we only included the most recent posts, made within the six months prior to the start of our analysis.

Analytical framework and procedures

In our research, we employed a thematic analysis within a digital ethnographic framework to explore patterns of language use and user behaviour across selected subreddits. Our methodological approach was oriented around the framework outlined by Postill and Pink (2012), who conceptualise digital ethnography as a flexible, immersive practice that adapts traditional ethnographic principles to the complexities of online environments. Inspired by their emphasis on 'messy' digital spaces, we approached Reddit as a dynamic cultural field, observing user interactions, discourse norms, and language patterns across selected subreddits. This enabled us to treat online posts not just as isolated texts but as socially embedded communicative acts, shaped by the affordances and culture of the platform. Our analysis focused on posts and profile descriptions that revealed user motivations, moderation practices and justifications, and the intersection of community dynamics with commercial activities. In particular, we followed posts or profile descriptions that described intentions and gave reasons for a particular post or user behaviour. Through this we aimed to understand the motivations for posting NSFW content and the ways in which users and moderators interact and engage with each other. We also observed the moderation practices in the subreddits and took note of moderator engagement and the explanations the moderators used when commenting on a post or removing content.

While Reddit is an anonymous platform in that users are not required to disclose their names, the individuals posting in these subreddits share sensitive information in the graphic material they publish. Moreover, some users share information in the comments or profile description, such as their location. To protect the privacy of the members, we did not gather any identifying information or share or replicate user names. When we quote user comments, profile descriptions, or posts, we paraphrase the parts of the text that could lead to identification of the user while keeping the content intact in order to avoid exposing users via their post history.

Interview component

While we did not actively engage in the communities by posting or commenting, we attempted to connect with active members and moderators of these subreddits by personally contacting around 15 user profiles, providing various contact options (via Reddit, Signal, or e-mail). However, in the current political climate and amidst concerns around online privacy and safety for queer individuals, especially in the United States, we were met with a heightened sense of caution. Some users initially responded to our messages but were not able to participate in our research, citing a sense of unease in the current political situation. Nevertheless, we were able to conduct a structured interview with an active moderator of several queer sex work subreddits. This interview lasted approximately 90 minutes across multiple exchanges, including a structured video call, and focused on moderation practices, community dynamics, and self-presentation strategies within these spaces.

To complement our observational research and provide context about digital sex work practices more broadly, we additionally conducted structured interviews with three active queer and trans sex workers in Europe whom we recruited through professional and academic networks, leading to a total of four participants in this study. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic and current political pressures affecting queer communities, we worked with available participants willing to share their experiences, prioritising participant safety and comfort over systematic sampling criteria. While these participants primarily operate on platforms other than Reddit, their experiences illuminate the broader ecosystem of digital platforms within which spaces like the subreddits we studied exist. Thus, in total, we were able to include four interview participants for whom (mainly digital) sex work is the main source of income. The interviews were informed by the initial patterns and themes identified during our digital ethnographic analysis and were structured around our core research questions (Postill, Pink 2012). The interview questions focused on participants' daily experiences offering NSFW services online, platform navigation strategies, community interactions, identity management, and interpretations of community norms.

Table 1: List of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity/ Race	Nationality	Gender identity	Pronouns	Place of residence
A.	29	White	Russian	Transgender non-binary	they/them	Germany
M.M.	35	Hispanic/ Latino (Mexican origin)	US American	Non-binary trans, presents femme for work	they/them	United States / Germany
N.N.	35	White	US American	Trans masculine, non-binary, gender fluid	they/them	Netherlands
S.P.	32	Fars/ Iranian	Iranian	Transmasculine, gender-noncon- forming, non-binary	he/him	Germany (as a refugee)

Source: Interviews with participants.

Interview data were transcribed and stored securely, with all identifying information removed to protect participant privacy. While our sample of four interviews is modest, these conversations served to complement and contextualise the patterns observed during our digital ethnographic analysis rather than provide generalisable findings. In analysing the data, we employed a mixed deductive–inductive approach, creating codes by combining themes drawn from the existing literature with insights emerging from our subreddit observations.

Limitations

Our approach aimed to glean an understanding of the motivations and culture of queer, community-driven digital sex work on Reddit. As a mainly observational study, it necessarily has some shortcomings that could affect the depth and reliability of the findings. Our focus on three major subreddits offers insight into trans and non-binary representations but captures only a limited slice of the broader queer digital sex work landscape on Reddit.

Moreover, although our observational approach aligned with digital ethnographic practices, enabling non-intrusive analysis of community interactions, passive observation may have limited our grasp of deeper contextual nuances. The platform’s anonymity, while ethically protective of participants, limits our ability to fully analyse how intersectional identities (race, class, nationality, disability) shape community experiences and representation. This represents a broader methodological consideration in anonymous digital spaces rather than a unique limitation of our approach.

The researchers' positionality

In line with Haraway's (1988: 581) critique of 'seeing everything from nowhere', we reject the notion of the objective, disembodied observer who parades as 'the all-seeing I' – an observer who acts as if their view is not situated and informed by the politics of location. Instead, we embrace the partiality of our perspective as a strength that allows for more responsible knowledge production. While neither of us is a digital sex worker on Reddit, our academic interests in body politics and queer representation inform our approach to this study. We acknowledge that our positionality as queer researchers shapes both our research questions and interpretations, and we engaged in reflexive practice throughout the research process to address these influences while maintaining methodological rigor.

Anna Ivanova's background includes experiences with marginalisation in Russia, which have shaped their scholarly interest in embodiment and corporeal agency. As a queer filmmaker and porn director, they bring an awareness of NSFW content production, while recognising the distinct differences between commercial production and the community-based content examined in this study. This positioning offers both an insider perspective on queer identity and creative work and an outsider perspective regarding the specific experiences of digital sex workers on Reddit. Dana Hombach comes from an academic perspective that is focused on the gendered perception of bodies in culture and social media.

Results

In this paper, we focus on three of the largest and currently most active communities for queer NSFW content: r/EnbyLewds, r/transporn, and r/FtMPorn. Each of these communities has emerged as an active space where queer and trans individuals can share explicit content, discuss identity, and engage with others who share similar experiences. To create a safer environment for the users, each subreddit has a set of rules and guidelines designed to protect members and ensure that harmful behaviours such as misgendering, transphobia, and harassment are not tolerated. Moderation practices are central to maintaining these boundaries, with moderators actively monitoring posts and comments to uphold these standards and with clear consequences for violations. We found each of the three subreddits to be quite distinct in their culture, customs, and communication. These differences are evident in the types of posts, engagements, and comments prevalent within the community, as well as in the focus of the various posts and the moderation practices. The following section describes each of the three subreddits in further detail and in comparison to each other.

r/transporn

The subreddit r/transporn describes itself as dedicated to ‘Amateur TRANS who wanna post porn on reddit’. It has a large community with around one million members. It enforces strict rules to foster a safer environment, including prohibitions on misgendering, crossdressing, photoshopping, and hookups, with clear consequences for violations. For instance, intentional misgendering is labelled as a ‘one-way ticket to the ban list’. While the promotion of platforms like OnlyFans is not allowed in the posts themselves, users are encouraged to include such links in their profiles, and most active users appear to have links to OnlyFans, cashapp, or similar services. However, our moderator interview revealed that these advertising restrictions do not create significant barriers for sex workers. As N.N. explained:

even as a sex worker, it's better to just make a post. And if your content is good, if your post is compelling, people will go to your profile and that's the actual advertising stream. So whether or not advertising is allowed or not, I'm like, don't even worry about it, guys, because, even if we did allow it, it just wouldn't be effective the way you want to do it.

The majority of the content shared is by trans women. Interestingly, users in this subreddit don't make much use of flairs, which are labels or tags that can be added to a user's profile or to a post within a subreddit and are used to provide additional context or categorisation. Crossposts or content shared across multiple subreddits are common, suggesting that many members are active in other communities as well. We found connections from r/transporn to a wide range of similar (transfeminine-focused) NSFW communities, such as r/hornytrans, r/TransGoneWild, r/OnlyIfShesPackin or others. Many users of r/transporn tend to crosspost identical content to a number of these subreddits. However, we only found occasional crossposts between r/transporn and the other two communities that we focused on in this study.

Within the r/transporn community, most of the posts we found over the course of our observations were short videos or GIFs. We found the comment sections to be very active, with posts often receiving hundreds of upvotes, numerous comments, and frequent replies. Original posters (OPs) often directly engage with and respond to other users. Moreover, user engagement is often encouraged by the OP by asking direct questions or by conducting surveys (‘fuck or suck’ is a popular post title, for instance). In terms of posting activity, we found that some users post a series of short clips in the same setting and style or wearing the same clothes, indicating that the content of a single session was split into several posts. Sometimes these serial video posts are also spread across a number of different (but related) subreddits. Over the course of the study, we found a large number of new profiles (in part generated

during the observation period) to be actively posting. We also found most profiles to have at least one link to a commercial or payment platform in their description, such as OnlyFans, cashapp, Wishlist, RedGIFs, or others. OnlyFans was by far the most prevalent link, and many profiles stated that their direct messages (DMs) were closed on Reddit and encouraged other users to contact them on OnlyFans. Many of the active profiles within r/transporn seemed to be using the subreddit as a way to connect to potential clients on other platforms, and some of them mentioned in their descriptions that they were within the 'top X%' of earners on OnlyFans.

r/FtMPorn

r/FtMPorn is aimed at trans men to share their own nudes and adult content. As r/transporn, it is guarded by a strict set of rules and has a clear stance on banning users who violate them, emphasising that 'we are not afraid to ban people!'. Together with r/EnbyLewds, it is run by a queer sex worker, N.N., who we were able to interview as part of this study. In contrast to r/transporn, r/FtMPorn explicitly permits promotions within posts as long as they include media featuring an actual person and are clearly marked as such by using the appropriate 'promotion' flair. Despite these different approaches to advertising policy, N.N. noted that explicit promotional posts consistently underperform compared to engaging content that drives organic profile visits. Users can choose from and are encouraged to use a variety of flairs, especially to describe the way in which they wish to be addressed, described, or interacted with. Consequently, flairs are widely used in this subreddit and include, but are not limited to, designating promoted posts, detailing the terms a user is comfortable with when describing their body (e.g. 'all anatomical terms', 'masculine anatomical terms only'), and labelling kinks. Moreover, the subreddit provides an extensive wiki resource focused on rules and guidelines regarding posts, but also on staying safe while posting NSFW content online. Amongst hints on how to secure content (e.g. by watermarking it), this section also provides safety advice and states that posts that include contact information will be deleted.

Active moderation does occur in the subreddit, ensuring that posts adhere to the rules, with deleted content often accompanied by clear justifications for its removal. Users with profiles that are too new and 'karma' that is too low (a Reddit-specific way of measuring user engagement by awarding points for active posts) cannot comment in the subreddit; their posts are automatically deleted. Occasionally, moderators actively engage in constructive conversation with users and use moderation as a way to educate rather than just delete posts. For instance, instead of deleting, banning, or other more restrictive practices, posts that disregard the rules around flairs are usually commented on with a reference to the relevant rule and retrospectively fitted

with the appropriate flair. In addition to this individualised moderation, the subreddit uses a number of moderation bots to automatically manage problematic users and spammers. Through the use of flairs in the subreddit, the preferred language for describing the depicted bodies was quite clear, and we found many comments to be actively affirmative of the stated preferences.

Our interview with community moderator and sex worker N.N. provided additional insight into the moderation philosophy. They emphasised the importance of in-group moderation, arguing that ‘moderators of trans subreddit should be trans people, because there’s possible harm being done to the community that a cis person might not understand’. This approach enables nuanced recognition of subtle forms of transphobia that might appear benign to outsiders. For example, N.N. identified posts titled ‘How drunk would you have to be to fuck me?’ as harmful because they imply that sexual contact with trans people would be a mistake requiring impaired judgement, reinforcing stigmatising narratives about trans desirability even when posted by trans individuals themselves.

Regarding the users of the subreddit, over the course of the study we found that the majority of active individuals fall within the category of amateur NSFW posters (‘amateur’ is used here to denote that these users are not affiliated with any form of porn industry). In addition, many of the users in this subreddit seem to engage in NSFW posts for reasons other than economic and rather seek gender affirmation or representation. Fewer than half of the investigated profiles link to any commercial tool or website. In contrast to *r/transporn*, none of the profiles we reviewed in *r/FtMPorn* made any statements about their commercial success on platforms such as OnlyFans. Some profiles mentioned the offer of customised content for a small price (usually at or below USD 10 for a video, gif, or picture), while other users stated that they post this type of content ‘mostly for themselves’, without seeking compensation for it.

In terms of posting behaviour, we found that users crosspost with a limited number of other subreddits, such as *r/ftmspanished*, *r/TransFeet*, or *r/t4t_porn* (trans for trans). We found hardly any crossposts to *r/transporn*, which underlines the observation that *r/transporn* caters to a different user group posts. The vast majority of users crosspost only to trans or FtM-specific subreddits, but a small subset of individuals within this subreddit show a certain degree of flexibility in posting also in NSFW communities directed towards content created by cis-women, such as *r/SheLovesPounding* and *r/ExtremelyHairyWomen*.

r/EnbyLewds

r/EnbyLewds serves as a dedicated space for non-binary individuals to share NSFW content, describing itself as a community for ‘non-binary, genderfluid, and gender

non-conforming people to post lewds'.⁴ Like the other communities analysed in this study, it maintains clear rules designed to create a safer environment, prohibiting harassment, misgendering, and non-consensual content sharing. What distinguishes r/EnbyLewds from other NSFW communities is that its moderators openly identify as transgender and non-binary themselves. The community structure of r/EnbyLewds has limited connections with r/FtMPorn, with N.N. as a moderator active in both communities. This connection provides some continuity in moderation approaches between the two spaces. Similar to r/FtMPorn, moderators in r/EnbyLewds employ a combination of manual moderation and automated tools (bots) to maintain community standards, which are quoted as 'body-positive community for 18+ non-binary/genderqueer people and other gender-nonconforming people to share their NSFW selfies and lewds. This is a sex work-friendly community'. Moreover, the moderators frequently engage constructively with users when issues arise.

The content shared in r/EnbyLewds consists exclusively of media posts (photos or short video clips), with users employing flairs to specify their gender identity, preferred terminology, and content type. Comments on posts are generally affirmative and supportive, often emphasising positive aspects of the poster's appearance or gender expression. The language used tends to be flexible and adaptable to each poster's preferences and avoids assumptions about how non-binary individuals wish their bodies to be described. Popular posts can receive around 100 comments, with interactive posts that include questions in the title (such as 'Tell me your favourite video game and I'll tell you if we can fuck') generating particularly high engagement.

Regarding the users of r/EnbyLewds, our observations indicate that the majority of regular posters link to commercial platforms like OnlyFans or Fansly in their profiles, suggesting that the community serves as part of a broader digital sex work ecosystem. An interesting finding unique to our observation of r/EnbyLewds is the prevalence of crossposting behaviours. Users frequently share their content across multiple NSFW communities, including some that employ terminology considered derogatory in queer-affirming spaces (such as r/traps with 1.6 million members). This strategic crossposting appears to be primarily motivated by economic considerations, as creators seek to attract more traffic to their monetised platforms. When posting in these less queer-friendly communities, we observed that the same users often adjust their language, adopting more objectifying or fetishising terminology that contrasts sharply

⁴ According to UrbanDictionary, 'a lewd is a photograph taken by oneself as a tease. Not a full on nude showing your private parts but teasing the receiver of the photograph. A picture of a girl in her underwear is considered a lewd'. Retrieved 10/4/2025 (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lewd>).

with the affirming language they employ in r/EnbyLewds. We do not aim to make normative statements about users' language practices, and while we acknowledge the contradictory and complex nature of using self-derogatory terms in queer-affirming spaces, a detailed discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of the present paper.

The moderator interview revealed specific challenges in community governance around what they termed 'straightbaiting' – for examples, posts in non-binary spaces with titles like 'Where are all the straight boys who want to fuck me?' As N.N. explained: 'You're in EnbyLewds ... you're here looking at non-binary people, then the idea is, you're not straight, so stop, pandering to these people who are disrespecting nonbinary people.' This example illustrates how community-led moderation enables recognition of subtle forms of erasure that might not be apparent to outsiders.

Insights from queer sex worker interviews

Platform ecosystem and strategic navigation

All interviewees described navigating complex digital ecosystems, which highlights the networked nature of sex work platforms described by Swords, Laing, and Cook (2021). Each participant strategically uses different platforms for different purposes within their overall workflow, which supports our observation that platforms serve overlapping functions within sex workers' digital strategies, and that shadowbanning and deplatforming are major issues for digital NSFW content creators.

S.P., a transmasculine sex worker, described the limited options available to them based on their gender presentation. They noted, 'as a trans masc person who doesn't pass as a cis woman, I don't have many options'. Their experience reflects how gender non-conformity can restrict access to certain markets or platforms that prioritise cisnormative beauty standards, underscoring the structural limitations some trans sex workers face. In contrast, A., who identifies as non-binary/transgender, illustrates a more strategic navigation of these constraints. They shift their branding across platforms – 'On [one platform] I brand myself as a transman, and on [another platform] as a non-binary woman who is really hairy and has a low voice' – and adapt their presentation to fit the perceived audience's expectations. While these are distinct experiences, both highlight how platform economies reward particular gendered embodiments, pushing marginalised creators to either confront or conform to normative standards in order to maintain visibility and economic viability.

Our interviews revealed that queer sex workers carefully select platforms based on their specific needs, client demographics, and the platforms' tolerance for sexual content. They develop complex cross-platform strategies to maximise visibility while minimising risk, often using one platform for initial client contact and another for ongoing communication and transactions.

M.M., a non-binary dominatrix who presents as femme for work, described platform instability as a major challenge: 'I'm starting to avoid Instagram because the TOS [terms of service] suck ... I've lost over 5 Instagram accounts'. This constant threat of deplatforming creates precarity, as there is ongoing uncertainty about whether one's digital presence will remain stable and accessible.

Similarly, N.N., who moderates various queer NSFW subreddits, describes Reddit as a valuable alternative to posting NSFW content and reaching an audience in comparison to other platforms:

I find Reddit compelling as a platform for sharing amateur content because it effectively fosters community hubs [in the form of subreddits] with a low barrier to entry: having a functional Reddit account, basically. Of course trans people can share nudes on sites like BlueSky and X just as easily, but without followers on those sites, it's hard to get visibility and engagement. Reddit puts everything on a subreddit feed so the size and age of one's account doesn't matter at all.

However, our research also uncovered concerning practices that threaten the integrity of community-led governance on Reddit. While moderation on Reddit is typically unpaid volunteer work, some moderators exploit their authority for financial gain, according to our interviews. N.N. described encountering a moderator who 'bans people from the subreddits who do better than the models who pay him. So he reduces competition by accepting bribes'. They noted they had been 'banned from multiple of his subreddits' despite never having posted in them, suggesting the pre-emptive exclusion of successful creators who might compete with paying clients. This monetisation of volunteer moderation roles creates barriers for creators who cannot or choose not to pay for favourable treatment, distorting what should be merit-based community participation. Such practices highlight how the economic pressures of unpaid digital labour can corrupt community governance, undermining the community-centred values that make effective moderation possible.

Reddit's platform architecture, as analysed in our theoretical framework, played a crucial role in enabling these interactions. The semi-anonymous nature of the platform encouraged candid self-expression, while the upvote/downvote system and comment threading fostered visibility and feedback. However, our interview with moderator N.N. revealed the significant costs of maintaining these affirming spaces:

Moderation is both tedious and challenging ... I have received hate mail and threats, harassment on my account, and even a power struggle with another moderator who didn't like how I was making rulings. In the last case it was so stressful that I had fantasies of totally destroying the subreddit.

Identity modulation, and strategic self-presentation

Our interviews provided substantial evidence for Duguay's (2022) concept of 'identity modulation'. Each interviewee described consciously adapting their gender presentation to maximise appeal and income on different platforms. For example, A. explicitly detailed how their gender presentation changes across platforms:

So [one platform] is for gay/bi men, so my pics there are more manly ... [another platform] has a lot of people who live in a delusion that I am really an enby woman who had top surgery for aesthetic or medical reasons. I try to be more girly in my pictures and in the way I chat with clients.

The strategic nature of these presentation decisions emerged clearly in M.M.'s reflections: 'I present hyper femme for work because I make more money since I grew my hair out, got fake lashes and nails etc. It sucks, but I'd rather have money.' They further explained: 'Although I'm transmasc non-binary, my gender identity at work is moving back to she/her sadly, as I don't earn as much when being open about my trans identity.'

Similarly, N.N. described adapting their gender presentation across platforms based on regional and cultural differences in trans awareness. On European platforms like F2F (a Dutch-based adult content platform similar to OnlyFans), they present 'as a gay man, because people do not have much awareness of trans people in particular, and no idea what I mean when I say genderfluid'. In contrast, on US and UK-focused platforms like OnlyFans and Fansly, they present as 'non-binary transmasc, and people will project whatever they want'. This geographic dimension of identity modulation highlights how creators must navigate not only platform-specific norms but also regional differences in queer awareness and acceptance.

These accounts align with our observations of crossposting behaviours on Reddit, where some users adapt their presentation and terminology when posting in less queer-friendly subreddits. This practice of users adapting their presentation and language when crossposting to less queer-friendly subreddits highlights the strategic self-positioning required in online sex work. This behaviour underscores the precariousness of digital labour in adult content spaces, where creators must constantly navigate shifting platform norms, community standards, and audience expectations to maintain visibility and safety. It reflects how online sex work involves not only content creation but also careful curation of identity and tone, often shaped by the need to access broader markets while avoiding harassment or deplatforming. These adaptive strategies reveal the complex interplay between authenticity, self-protection, and marketability that characterises digital sex work (Wang, Ding 2022; Labor 2025). However, the interviews reveal the emotional complexities behind these strategies.

Mistress Maven described this adaptation as ‘pretty depressing’, adding, ‘I guess I have been struggling to earn enough to focus on transition. Eventually, I’ll open a dungeon and be able to cut my hair again and transition.’

For S.P., the ability to maintain authenticity in gender presentation is a bottom line: ‘If a client is not interested in my gender presentation, they can find another sex worker who can respond to their desires and needs. I perform as I want, and I’m not trying to mask.’ This stance reflects an important counterpoint to the economic pressures that often drive identity modulation, highlighting how some sex workers prioritise authenticity even when it might limit their potential client base.

Market realities and clientele dynamics

The interviews revealed significant insights about market pressures and client relationships that help contextualise our observations of content creators’ behaviours on Reddit. All interviewees described navigating economic pressures while trying to maintain boundaries and authenticity.

N.N., drawing on their experience as a subreddit moderator, explained that while the majority of the posts in the subreddits they manage are strictly non-commercial, about one-quarter are promotional posts submitted by sex workers. A. noted how clients often misunderstand or fetishise transness: ‘I know that the majority of my clients think that transness is some kind of pose or aesthetic, or they do not factor it in at all. They usually call me FtM (female to male) and even that verbiage is so anatomical and objectifying that it gives me an ick’. This objectification parallels what we observed in some Reddit communities, particularly those with less community-centred moderation.

S.P. described their clientele in structural terms: ‘All of my clients are white, queer cis men, mostly wealthy and over 40’, highlighting the class and racial dynamics that shape client relationships. They also noted that the queer community they personally identify with often ‘can’t afford meeting an escort’, creating a separation between their personal community and their client base.

N.N.’s experience further illustrates the structural challenges facing trans content creators, describing what they call the ‘trans ghetto online’, where ‘all trans content is kind of shunted into its own thing. Trans women are not treated as women. They’re treated as trans women’. They noted the particular invisibility of transmasculine creators: ‘transmasc people are not even on the radar, we’re like either in with gay men or with trans women, and it’s kind of a 50/50 split of where we’re put’. As N.N. explained, this segregation creates significant barriers to audience discovery: ‘men who are going to cis women’s profile[s] will not often click on my profile. Gay men, gay performers will be like, “What the hell are you?”’

Moreover, N.N.’s personal experience exemplifies a process of identity formation through digital self-representation. They described how sex work became intertwined

with gender exploration: ‘I started sex work when I was starting to question my gender identity and experiment with it more, and [I] transitioned medically while still creating content. So there’s this record, visual, an auditory record of my transition through work’. This documentation process began unconsciously through posting ‘lewds’ on Reddit during early gender questioning: ‘I wasn’t doing this consciously, but, looking back, it was me trying to be, like, Is this acceptable? Is this desirable? What’s going on with me? And using the reactions of others to understand, in some ways, how I felt.’ The positive community responses provided crucial affirmation that encouraged continued participation, as expressed in their personal emphasis: ‘I strongly believe in freedom of expression, including erotic expression. I believe that trans people are desirable and beautiful and should have an easy way to share their content online.’

M.M., on the other hand, directly addressed how being openly transgender affects income: ‘I still get messages from ppl saying straight up that they will pay me less for being trans’. This economic pressure helps explain the identity modulation strategies we observed across both the interviews and Reddit communities, where queer sex workers must balance authentic self-expression against financial necessity.

Discussion

Our investigation of r/transporn, r/FtMPorn, and r/EnbyLewds revealed distinct community cultures that simultaneously serve affirmation and commercial purposes, though with significant differences in how these functions are balanced and prioritised.

Community governance and cultural distinctions

Our analysis revealed that governance structures fundamentally shape community dynamics. r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds, both moderated by members of the queer and transgender community, demonstrated stronger community coherence and more nuanced approaches to identity affirmation compared to r/transporn. This difference in governance appeared to create separate spheres of influence, with minimal crossposting or interaction between r/transporn and the other two communities. While r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds shared moderators and showed substantial overlap through crossposting and commenting, r/transporn operated within its own network of transfeminine-focused communities.

The moderation approaches also differed significantly. In r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds, we observed educational moderation practices where moderators explained rule violations and worked constructively with users. In contrast, r/transporn showed more straightforward enforcement without the same level of community dialogue.

This aligns with our finding that community-led governance creates more responsive and contextually aware moderation practices.

N.N.'s moderation experience demonstrates the sophisticated cultural competency required for effective trans community governance. For instance, they regularly intervene when users post titles asking questions like 'Is it gay to fuck a T boy?' N.N. recognises this as problematic, as they explain to users: 'this is you misgendering yourself, and you're asking cis men to affirm, or not, that you are fuckable because of your gender identity, and that's kind of fucked up'. This intervention reveals that effective moderation requires not only an understanding of trans identity politics but also the ability to recognise the subtle manifestations of internalised transphobia in sexual contexts – cultural knowledge that would be challenging for cisgender moderators to develop.

Contradictions between affirmation and commerce

A central tension emerged between community-building and commercial activities. While N.N. emphasised that 'over 3/4 of all posts (maybe more)' in their subreddits are non-commercial and seeking affirmation, our observational data revealed a more complex picture. In r/transporn, nearly all regular posters maintained prominent links to commercial platforms in their biographies, suggesting a primarily commercial motivation. However, in r/FtMPorn, fewer than half of the investigated profiles linked to commercial platforms, with many users explicitly stating they post 'mostly for themselves'.

This contradiction reflects different user populations and motivations across subreddits. r/EnbyLewds fell somewhere between these extremes, with a majority of users linking to commercial platforms while also maintaining strong community engagement patterns. The interview data help to explain this complexity: participants described how economic pressures often coexist with genuine desires for community and affirmation, making it difficult to separate purely commercial from purely social motivations.

Gender affirmation in digital spaces

The affirmative interactions we observed across all three subreddits align with the concept of queer joy (Wright, Falek 2024). Users engaged in playful, gender-flexible interactions that challenged heteronormative scripts through posts spanning from casual activities ('Will you be my gayming buddy?') to more intimate invitations. These socially interactive posts were particularly prevalent in r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds, generating active comment sections with sustained back-and-forth between OPs and commenters.

The flair system on r/FtMPorn allowed users to specify preferred anatomical terminology (masculine, feminine, or all terms), giving them some control over how their bodies were described in the comments. This represents a departure from fixed categorisation systems, though the options remain limited. This connects to Watson's (2021) analysis of how a community-based organisation can provide more user agency than traditional categories.

Our findings, as expressed in interview statements especially by N.N., as well as in our subreddit observations, confirm that these spaces function as sites for digital self-representation and identity work. This supports Tiidenberg's (2015) theory of how visual sharing provides a 'witnessed manifestation' of identity transitions. This also relates to creating a sense of queer joy, in which queer bodies and identities are being seen and celebrated (Wright, Falek 2024). In this, these communities function similarly to the trans vlogging spaces described by Raun (2016) that serve multiple purposes simultaneously: mirrors for self-reflection, documentation platforms, and community-building forums.

Sex work and community dynamics

While the affirmative aspects are significant, our observations reveal that many active users also employ these subreddits strategically as marketing channels. Commercial activities took three primary forms: explicit promotion posts (permitted only in r/FtMPorn); profile links to monetised platforms (dominant across all subreddits); and private transactions through direct messaging. This pattern aligns with Paasonen, Jarrett, and Light's (2019) analysis of how independent content creators build audience relationships through significant unpaid labour with uncertain returns. Commercial creators typically responded more actively to comments, using brief acknowledgements and emojis to build rapport while avoiding explicit solicitation, which would violate subreddit rules. These interactions represent what our framework identifies as the blurring of boundaries between promotional activities and personal time. Creators must maintain a consistent presence, responding to comments and engaging with their audience without any guarantee that these interactions will convert to paid subscriptions. This creates a precarious work environment, where the boundaries between promotional activities and personal time become increasingly blurred, requiring constant attention to audience engagement.

However, these commercial activities cannot be understood as simply transactional. Content creators across all three subreddits also commented appreciatively on other creators' content, and the boundaries between creators, consumers, and supporters frequently blurred. This reflects Smith's (2017) concept of 'erotic culture that is simultaneously public and private'.

Part of this erotic culture is the community aspect of the subreddits: The spaces are run and moderated by active community members, some of whom participate in commenting and content creation themselves. Content creators across all three observed subreddits comment on other creators' content, leaving appreciative remarks or emojis. Especially in r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds, but to a lesser degree also in r/transporn, the borders between users acting as content creators or as potential clients are frequently blurred. These blurred lines create a fluid and inclusive space, where individuals can move between roles as consumers, creators, and supporters, without being constrained by rigid distinctions. Furthermore, this blurring of roles contributes to the overall ethos of mutual recognition and affirmation we described for the observed subreddits.

This multifaceted nature of these online spaces recalls Raun's (2016: epilogue) observation that platforms like YouTube (and in our case Reddit) can become 'a site for self-revelation as much as for self-creation, and a site for community building as much as for business enterprise'. Like in Raun's study, we observed that 'community and commerce go hand in hand' with self-promotion that often serves both economic needs and the purpose of becoming a visible trans advocate. The economic dimension rarely overshadows the community-building aspect, suggesting that these spaces function simultaneously as vehicles for the 'communication and production of trans identity' and platforms for financial support.

However, one must refrain from idealising community-led moderation as a purely altruistic endeavour, as our interviews reveal how these community structures can be exploited, especially in the intersection of economic pressures and platform affordances. The unethical monetisation strategies described by N.N. (banning potential competitors in favour of paying users) undermine the meritocratic ideals of the platform and introduce gatekeeping dynamics that privilege financial access over community value. Furthermore, the emotional toll and interpersonal conflicts described by N.N., including harassment and internal power struggles, expose the unsustainable demands of unpaid digital labour.

Identity modulation and market pressures

Market pressures significantly impact how queer and trans content creators present themselves online. They are even more pronounced when we examine how creators navigate between different digital spaces. We observed users crossposting in less trans-friendly subreddits while strategically adapting their self-presentation and terminology to match the expectations of those spaces. This crossposting behaviour illustrates Duguay's (2022) concept of 'identity modulation' – a process where individuals adjust how they frame and present their identities across digital spaces with different norms and audiences.

This practice demonstrates Tiidenberg's (2020) concept of multifaceted identity performance across different digital contexts. Users brought particular aspects of themselves to the fore in specific situations, creating what can be understood as digital code-switching. The performative aspect of identity becomes particularly visible when users navigate different subreddits with varying norms and expectations.

For non-binary and trans content creators, this practice reflects the economic pressures they navigate while seeking to maintain authentic self-expression in queer-affirming spaces. It highlights the significant difference between community-moderated spaces like *r/EnbyLewds*, where moderators themselves identify as part of the community they serve, and larger NSFW subreddits focused on trans content (such as *r/traps*), where moderators typically do not identify as transgender or non-binary, resulting in spaces that tend to exoticise rather than affirm trans and non-binary identities.

The harsh economic realities of digital sex work mean that visibility and audience size directly impact income potential. Larger subreddits, even those with a problematic framing of trans bodies, offer access to substantially larger potential client bases. For creators attempting to earn a living through platforms like OnlyFans, this exposure can be crucial for financial survival.

Our observations on Reddit revealed that users often crossposted to larger subreddits that employed fetishising representations – ones emphasising certain physical attributes or using terminology that positions trans bodies as exotic or unusual. This suggests that these spaces may be more numerous and accessible than the community-focused affirming spaces we studied. This imbalance creates market structures that financially reward certain narratives about trans bodies while offering fewer economic opportunities for authentic self-representation. The phenomenon illustrates Raun's (2016) observation about the intertwining of community and commerce in trans digital spaces. This imbalance in available platforms creates what can be understood as a form of digital code-switching, where individuals adapt their language and presentation to navigate different digital contexts while maintaining their core identities. Importantly, these strategic adaptations do not reflect the authenticity or legitimacy of trans identities. Rather, they highlight the unfair burdens placed on marginalised creators, which come with mental and emotional costs, as discussed in the interviews we conducted within this study. The burden of navigating these tensions falls unfairly on trans and non-binary creators who must balance economic needs against authentic representation.

Conclusion

In this paper, we investigated the subcultures of trans NSFW posts in three subreddits: r/transporn, r/FtMPorn, and r/EnbyLewds. We chose the approach of qualitative observation in order to gain an understanding of the cultures and motivations within these subreddits. We focused on these three subreddits because we found them to be currently the leading subreddits for their respective focuses. Our analysis revealed distinct patterns of community governance and interconnection among these subreddits: While r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds share moderators who explicitly identify as queer and transgender themselves, creating communities managed by members of the populations they cater to, r/transporn is not moderated by members of the queer community. This difference in governance appears to create separate spheres of influence, with minimal interaction between r/transporn and the other two communities we studied. While we found a strong overlap between r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds in the form of crossposting and commenting, r/transporn instead operates within its own network of transfeminine-focused communities.

Our exploration of the subcultures within the queer NSFW communities of r/transporn, r/FtMPorn, and r/EnbyLewds reveals the complex ways in which these spaces foster affirmation, support, and interaction and thereby contribute to community and culture building. Despite their shared focus on trans and non-binary identities, each subreddit maintains unique cultural practices that reflect different gendered and sexual experiences, from language and anatomical descriptions to moderation policies. These variations are not incidental but reflect how community-led governance shapes online environments: spaces moderated by members of the community they serve, like r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds, develop notably different cultures than those with more external governance structures. Our analysis highlights how the specific affordances of Reddit – including its semi-anonymous architecture, bottom-up moderation model, and use of flairs and community rules – enable these spaces to foster affirmation, visibility, and a sense of belonging. In particular, subreddits moderated by in-group members (r/FtMPorn and r/EnbyLewds) demonstrated community coherence and intersectional awareness.

The interviews with queer sex workers provide additional context and critical reflection, highlighting how these Reddit communities exist within a broader digital ecosystem where content creators must navigate multiple platforms with varying norms, audience expectations, and economic pressures. As demonstrated by both our Reddit observations and interview data, content creators often engage in strategic identity modulation across platforms, balancing authentic self-expression against economic considerations. This highlights the ongoing tension between authentic self-expression and financial survival that characterises queer digital sex work.

The role of digital sex work in these subcultures further reveals the complex interplay between creative content production and community building. The blurred boundaries between content creators and audiences, as well as between transactional and social interactions, challenge simplistic understandings of digital sex work as merely commercial. These spaces function simultaneously as sites for identity validation and as marketing channels, with these purposes often complementing rather than contradicting each other.

While these communities create important opportunities for representation and affirmation, they also operate within the constraints of platform capitalism and its economic pressures. The subreddits we studied demonstrate both the potential for community-led spaces to foster supportive environments and the ongoing challenges of creating truly inclusive digital cultures. By examining these dynamics, our research contributes to understanding how marginalised communities carve out digital spaces that serve multiple, sometimes conflicting purposes – enabling members of these communities to engage in personal expression and economic activity while navigating the constraints of the larger platform ecosystems.

Our research reveals that successful queer digital communities require more than just permissive content policies. Community-led governance, flexible identity categories, and active protection against harassment emerge as crucial factors in creating spaces where both commercial and affirmative activities can coexist productively.

The strategic modulation of identity and the struggles around moderation practices that we observed also highlight the broader structural inequalities facing queer content creators. While platforms like Reddit offer important alternatives to more restrictive social media, they operate within economic systems that often reward the fetishisation of representations of queer bodies over their affirmation. Users must navigate these constraints using careful presentation strategies that protect their authentic identities while maintaining their economic viability and also protecting their mental health.

Finally, our findings suggest that the boundaries between sex work, community building, and identity affirmation are becoming increasingly blurred in digital spaces. Rather than viewing these as competing motivations, our research indicates that they often function as complementary aspects of queer digital life, with users finding ways to meet economic needs while building meaningful community connections.

Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere gratitude to our four participants for generously sharing their experiences, insights, and expertise as digital sex workers. Their willingness to participate in the interviews despite the current political challenges facing queer and sex

worker communities has been invaluable to our research. Their perspectives have significantly enriched our understanding of the complex realities of platform navigation and identity presentation in digital sex work contexts.

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